

November 5th, 2021 | Andy Hall

## ESPN Saluting Veterans, Active U.S. Armed Forces with Nov. 8-15 Veterans Week Initiatives

Following its annual tradition of Veterans Day recognition, ESPN will salute veterans and active members of the U.S. Armed Forces with a week of programming and initiatives across platforms Nov. 8-15.

The centerpiece of the America's Heroes tribute will be the *SportsCenter* special *Salute to Service*, airing on Veterans Day, Thursday, Nov. 11, at 6:30 p.m. ET on ESPN and on ABC on Sunday, Nov. 14, at 1:30 p.m. Hosted by *SportsCenter* anchor Michael Eaves, the one-hour program airs with the background of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Ct., and Coast Guard Station New York.

Other highlights of the week will include five days of Veterans Week content on *First Take* Nov. 8-12 and features on *SportsCenter* Nov. 11-14. ESPN programs including *Get Up!*, *NFL Countdown*, *Monday Night Countdown*, *Monday Night Football* and *College GameDay* also will have Veterans Week content as will ESPN's digital and audio platforms.

"Every year ESPN is proud to celebrate Veterans Day and honor our veterans and active military through our storytelling across our linear and digital platforms," said Kevin Martinez, ESPN vice president of Corporate Citizenship. "We are also committed to helping veterans and their families find career opportunities to help create new possibilities."

USAA is continuing its longstanding presenting sponsorship of ESPN's America's Heroes activation and many well-known athletes, coaches and celebrities will provide daily "shout outs" sponsored by USAA to members of the military within ESPN programming. Among the participants: Dawn Staley, Kara Lawson, Arike Ogunbowale, Niele Ivey, Katie Meier, Jocelyn Willoughby, C. Vivian Stringer and Sydney Wiese (WNBA and women's college basketball); Aaron Judge (MLB); Pat Maroon (NHL); and Cobi Jones and Kelley O'Hara (USMNT and USWNT soccer).

Also Jimmy Butler, Draymond Green, Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum (NBA), Aaron Rodgers, Russell Wilson, Ben Roethlisberger, Christian McCaffrey, Baker Mayfield, Kliff Kingsbury and Jameis Winston (NFL); and Dabo Swinney, Jimbo Fisher, Lincoln Riley, Nick Saban, Lane Kiffin, Mike Krzyzewski, James Franklin, Ryan Day, Kirby Smart, Jordan Davis, Jahan Dotson, Haskell Garrett and Chris Olave (college football and basketball) will be participants.

ESPN's "American Heroes" week will feature:

*SportsCenter Special – Salute to Service* (Nov. 11, 6:30 p.m., ESPN; Nov. 14, 1:30 p.m., ABC)

Originating from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and Coast Guard Station New York, the one-hour special, presented by USAA, will include features and interviews. Among the content that will air in the program and appear on other ESPN platforms:

- Coast Guard's role in protecting New York City – ESPN's Marty Smith gets a first-hand tour of the New York harbor. He discusses the Coast Guard's role in Sept. 11, the rescue of passengers from USAirways Flight 1549 that landed in the Hudson River and the day-to-day work involved in protecting the water around the city.
- Coast Guard Captain Patrick Bennett — Jeff Saturday interviews Coast Guard Academy Hall of Fame football player Patrick Bennett aboard a Coast Guard Cutter ship. They discuss lessons learned on the football field and how he applies them every day as a ship's captain. The feature also will air on ESPN's morning program *Get Up!*
- Ulysses "CC" Grant — Booger McFarland sits down with CC Grant, the head football coach at the Coast Guard Academy. In 2020, he became the first African American head football coach at any of the military academies.
- Pea Island — The U.S. Coast Guard Academy football team is wearing Pea Island jerseys this season to commemorate the Pea Island life-saving station. Pea Island Station, located on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, was the first station to be manned entirely by a Black keeper and crew. The great, great grandson of one of the keepers, Solomon Ashby III, is a freshman football player at the USCGA. William C. Rhoden of *The Undeclared*
- Women in the Coast Guard Academy roundtable – Forty percent of the cadets at the Coast Guard Academy are female, the highest percentage of the service academies. Nearly 70 percent of all cadets play either a varsity or club sport. Kelsey Riggs has a

roundtable discussion with two female coaches (softball/soccer) and two female cadets (soccer/track and field) to discuss the balance between sports and service.

- Captain Zeita Merchant — Elle Duncan traveled to New York to interview Coast Guard Captain Zeita Merchant, the woman responsible for every ship that touches the water surrounding New York City. From cargo ships to kayaks, there is not a boat in the water that Captain Merchant is not aware of and responsible for.
- SCANTS — Shipboard Control and Navigation Training System (SCANTS) is a state-of-the-art simulation system that is located on the USCGA campus. ESPN reporter Sal Paolantonio got an opportunity to relive his days in the Navy as he took the simulated wheel of a Coast Guard Cutter ship.

Also during the program, Paolantonio and Jimmy Pitaro, Chairman, ESPN and Sports Content, discuss Paolantonio's time in the Navy and ESPN's initiatives for veterans.

*First Take* (Monday-Friday, 10 a.m., ESPN)

Beginning Monday, Nov. 8, *First Take* will virtually showcase international U.S. military bases around the world, many of which are home to multiple branches of service. Every episode throughout the week will spotlight and recognize service members with tributes from the nation's top military leaders as well as special content, features and more. On Wednesday, Nov. 10, *First Take* will also be recognizing and honoring the 246th birthday of the U.S. Marines.

*SportsCenter*

ESPN's signature news and information program will air multiple Veterans Day-related features presented by USAA on Nov. 11-14 in various editions.

Americas Heroes on Other ESPN Platforms

NFL Programming

For the *Monday Night Football* game on Nov. 15 between the Los Angeles Rams and San Francisco 49ers, the MNF crew highlights the 101st Airborne Division. In addition, a Navy Seal parachute team will jump into the stadium with an all-military vocal group singing the National Anthem. The U.S. Air Force Band will perform the *Monday Night Football* theme at the stadium. Also, the SOCOM (United States Special Operations Command) Parachute Team is flying the *Monday Night Football* flag on a jump the weekend of Nov. 6-7.

ESPN's NFL programming will include a feature on JJ Watt, who, when he joined the Arizona Cardinals, learned that his number had been retired. But when Watt found out it was retired to honor a veteran from WWII, he called the family to ask for permission to honor him.

Also, a feature will air showing U.S. military bases from Kuwait to Korea getting a slice of normalcy when they get to enjoy NFL Sundays from afar.

For the *Monday Night Football* game on Nov. 8 between the Chicago Bears and Pittsburgh Steelers, former Steeler Rocky Bleier, a Vietnam veteran, will be at the game to honor veterans and will be featured during the telecast.

USAA will sponsor a Salute to Service at halftime of the Nov. 15 game and will be the presenting sponsor of *NFL Live* during Veterans Week.

## College GameDay and College Football

On Saturday, Nov. 13, *College GameDay Built by The Home Depot* (9 a.m., ESPN) will include various elements honoring Veterans and active military throughout the show. The show will have a feature on Nebraska linebacker Damian Jackson, who after two deployments as a Navy Seal and despite never playing football had a dream to play in college.

Shout-outs to military will also air during select college football game telecasts between Nov. 9-13.

## Secretaries' Cup Football Game

ESPN3 will televise the annual Secretaries' Cup football game between the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy on Saturday, Nov. 13, at noon ET.

## SEC Network

SEC Network will honor veterans throughout the week during SECN studio and feature programming, hearing from coaches and student-athletes about what Veterans Day means to them, including those with family members who have served. Additionally, Marty Smith will share the story of Vanderbilt walk-on tight end Tommy Smith, a 32-year-old active duty Navy officer and married father of two. The feature will air in the Saturday, Nov. 13 episode of *SEC Nation* (10 a.m. ET).

## ACC Network

On Saturday, Nov. 6, ACC Network will air a vignette on 95-year-old Duke super fan and WWII veteran Joseph Collie. The Duke vs. Army game on Nov. 12, which is the Duke Veterans Day Weekend Showcase, will include an element on Duke coach Mike Krzyewski and his connection to West Point. A Veterans Week vignette will air Nov. 13 on Lawrence Joel, for whom the Wake Forest basketball arena is named. Joel is the only Winston-Salem, N.C., native ever to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Korean and Vietnam War veteran also received the Silver Star.

## SC Featured: *The Return*

The award-winning ESPN SC *Featured* film *The Return* will air multiple times on ESPN's television networks during Veterans Week. In the film, former Notre Dame and Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rocky Bleier returns to Vietnam for the first time since he was wounded in combat there 50 years earlier. Bleier walks in the same valley where his U.S. Army company was ambushed on August 20, 1969. The film airs Nov. 8 (1 a.m. ET, ESPNEWS); Nov. 9 (7:30 p.m., ESPNEWS); Nov. 12 (5:30 p.m., ESPNEWS); Nov. 13 (7 a.m., ESPN2); and Nov. 14 (10 a.m., ESPNEWS).

## ESPN.com

Among Veterans Week-related pieces scheduled to appear on ESPN.com during the week:

- 11: Story on Will "Akuna" Robinson, an Iraq War veteran who was discharged from the Army and returned to New Orleans in 2004 with a reconstructed (mostly metal) wrist, a permanent hip injury, and ravaged by PTSD. After nearly 12 years of self-medication, Akuna took up hiking as a coping mechanism in 2016 and, in 2019, became the first Black man to complete the Triple Crown of Hiking – completing the Appalachian, Pacific Crest and Continental Divide trails, covering nearly 8,000 miles and touching 22 states. The piece is written by Matt Gallagher, who was a captain in the Iraq War. In addition to publishing two novels, he wrote an Iraq War memoir called *Kaboom*.

## The Undefeated

- Pea Island — The U.S. Coast Guard Academy football team is wearing Pea Island jerseys this season to commemorate the Pea Island life-saving station. Pea Island Station, located on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, was the first station to be manned entirely by a Black keeper and crew. The great, great grandson of one of the keepers, Solomon Ashby III, is a freshman football player at the USCGA. William C. Rhoden The feature will appear on TheUndefeated.com, on The Undefeated's YouTube channel and will air as part of the Nov. 11 *SportsCenter* Veterans Day special.

## UFC Programming

Disabled American Veterans (DAV) will sponsor the decision announcements for the Nov. 6 UFC 268 Prelims as well as vignettes with two athletes thanking members of the military. In addition, there will be a recognition of ESPN's support of the job fairs for veterans around the DAV integrations. Prelims air at 8 p.m. ET on ESPN+, ESPNEWS and ESPN Deportes.

## ESPN Fantasy Sports

On Nov. 11, Matthew Berry's Love/Hate column pays tribute to Andy Mousalimas, who played in the original fantasy football league and is known for helping spread fantasy football to the public. Mousalimas passed away last year at age 95. What fantasy football players might not know about Mousalimas is that he was a decorated WWII veteran who was one of America's greatest war heroes.

## ESPN Corporate Citizenship

In recognition of the sacrifices our active military and veterans have made, ESPN is committed to supporting organizations dedicated to those that have served. This includes teaming up with Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to support virtual career fairs that provide access to critical employment opportunities to transitioning military members, veterans and their spouses seeking new or better jobs. Earlier this year, ESPN-supported DAV virtual career fairs engaged nearly 7,900 veterans and spouses, resulting in 2,900 interviews being conducted and 960 job offers made. ESPN also is proud to pair employees as mentors with veterans and their spouses through the American Corporate Partners (ACP) program, which connects post 9/11 veterans to business professionals for mentoring, career counseling and networking.